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# WATER BOTTLES FROM CHINA: DECODING VISUAL GRAMMAR

Beryl Exley & Linda Tate  
Queensland University of Technology

## The ALEA Study Tour: A First Night Dilemma

On the ALEA Study Tour to China, Beryl Exley and her roomie Kathryn O'Sullivan pondered over their first night dilemma whilst staying at a hotel in Beijing. They read the room service guide (in English) which advised against drinking the tap water and confirming the supply of one bottle of complementary water per guest per day. The room service guide listed 'special' bottled water was the equivalent of \$AUS7 per bottle. However the dilemma was this: sitting on the shelf above the fridge were three different kinds of water-like bottles. Each had a different label, written mainly in Chinese characters. Not wanting to mistake the bottles, Beryl and Kathryn set about decoding the text of the three bottles in question.

Their first strategy was to identify any English words. One bottle was identified as 'Mineralised Water'. The 'Nutrition Information' chart on a second bottle enabled this bottle to be dismissed as 'most probably' lemonade vis-a-vis another which had 'energy, protein, fat and carbohydrates' listed as '0'. This latter bottle must have been water too. Other visual text added to their growing confidence that they had at least identified the two water bottles. One label had a stylised picture of a snow-capped mountain, possibly the source of the water. It was endorsed as an official product for the Olympics. There was a significantly large silhouette, which at this point in time was indecipherable to Beryl and Kathryn. The other label contained what looked like a stylised image of a stream and water drops (see Figure One).



FIGURE ONE: Two water bottle labels

The visual literacy skills brought to bear to solve their water bottle dilemma involved interacting with the text in a similar way to a well-scaffolded beginning reader.

Beginning readers need to be able to decode and comprehend through what can be described as a *Coding Orientation*. According to de Silva Joyce and Gaudin (2007), the subject matter and purpose of an image can determine the mode used to create it; this is the coding orientation. An image 'reader' who uses coding orientation is clued into the type of information the image is attempting to reveal. De Silva Joyce and Gaudin (2007, p.90) state, "*Coding orientation corresponds to genres in written texts. In fact, coding orientations are often best considered within the context of multi-modal communications, which combine both text and images.*" Beryl and Kathryn's understandings of coding orientation of some written and visual text enabled initial differentiation of the labels according to type of information presented.

*"Images involve two kinds of participants, represented participants (the people, the places and things represented in images) and interactive participants (the people who communicate with each other through images, the producers and viewers of images)"* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p.114). Interactive participants use their knowledge of encoding of social, situational and cultural interactions in understanding images. When faced with images representing an unfamiliar cultural context, Beryl and Kathryn use their knowledge of Western visual texts to compare and contrast. An interesting aside was the recognition of the blend of Eastern and western iconographical elements. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) note the juxtaposition of directionality, text types and colour schemes in many Asian forms of modern visual design.

However, the problem remained: which bottle was the complementary water and which would cost a pretty penny? As can be seen in Figure One, the other distinguishing features of the two water bottle labels were, at a cursory glance, virtually indecipherable to non-Mandarin readers.

Finally one of them ventured outside looking for inspiration and noticed the cleaning lady's trolley in the hallway. On the top, alongside the supplies for replenishing the toiletries, were a tray of water bottles. It was this understanding of the culture of situation, that the complementary water might be delivered by the cleaning lady and that the 'special water' might be delivered by whomever refilled the room service fridge, that increased their confidence that they could now identify the 'right' water bottle.

This dilemma was the stimulus for the collection of more drink bottle labels during the rest of the study tour. It was when more of the Olympics water labels (see Figure Two) were collected and compared, that the silhouette of the first label and its inscriptions became a focus of analysis. The silhouettes not only represented the various sports, but quite possibly were the Chinese national heroes of the particular sports. This possibility was discerned from what differed across the set: what looked like a personal signature and possibly a name written in Mandarin or the name of the sport.

FIGURE TWO: A set of Olympic inspired water bottle labels collected in Beijing.







FIGURE THREE: A set of water bottle labels depicting Leehom Wang (singer and actor).

Another set of labels collected are shown as Figure Three. These were labels Beryl brought back to Australia. She discussed them with her co-author, Linda Tate. They could identify Wahaha as the brand name and due to the prominence of the English text, that this water was 'Purified Water for Drinking'.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) discuss another dimension utilised in reading images. They define the grammar of images as 'the meanings and regularities in the way image elements are used' (p.1). They also draw on Halliday, who defines grammar as "a means of representing patterns of experience... It enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality, to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them." (Halliday, 1985, p.101, as quoted in Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p 2). Put another way, "grammar" is the study of rules governing the use of language, and the relationship of grammatical structures. Visual structures, like their linguistic counterparts, can be interpreted using experience and knowledge of cultural and situational meanings. Rather than insisting on a clear distinction between what is deemed "grammatical" and "ungrammatical", as is the case in a

traditional analysis, a functional analysis focuses on the form in relation to content and context. In other words, functional grammar focuses on elements in terms of their communicative functions, that is, how semiotics are used in a principled and systematic way for making meaning (Derewianka, 2002).

Following M.A.K. Halliday, functional grammar theory enables the identification of three kinds of meanings: *ideational* meanings that build subject matter or field; *interpersonal* meanings that construe roles and relationships through tenor; and *textual* meanings that construct the mode and medium, or flow of a text (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). To think about grammar as a resource for making and exchanging meanings, it is necessary to explore what these might mean in relation to meaning itself (Fox & Exley, 2009).

- *Ideational* meaning refers to the way texts represent experiences of the world, as well as inner thoughts and feelings, from the familiar world through to the abstract. Ideational meanings are realized through field or subject matter. In visual text, the subject matter is represented through what is going on (processes), participants, and setting (circumstances) identifiable through the text (Fox & Exley, 2009).
- *Interpersonal* meaning has to do with the ways in which text producers and consumers exchange meaning. Interpersonal meanings are realised through tenor or put another way, through the roles and relationships of producers and consumers of text. In visual text, exchange is constructed by viewpoint and/or viewer/subject orientation, that is, the placement of the viewer and subject in relation to one another (Hart, 1999).
- *Textual* meaning relates to the ways in which text is organized and connected. In visual text, meaning is realized through composition and form. Composition refers to the concepts associated with the organization or arrangement (Hart, 1999). Form refers to the media and techniques used, tools, and surfaces.

Undertaking an analysis of text is complex. This is because ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings intersect; they unfold simultaneously, whilst each contributes different structures to a text (Ravelli, 2006).

In terms of the *ideational meaning* of the Figure Three water bottle labels, the visual semiotics reveal four main **participants**, each of which serve a different function.

- The most dominant of the participants, identified as such by the use of full colour, size and its centered position, is the young handsome Chinese man. Beryl and Linda deduce he must be very popular as he is on each of the water bottle labels in a different shot. It is at this point that Beryl and Linda enter into discussion with another colleague, Dr Shu Mou, an academic from Beijing Union University, who is able to shed some light on their evolving hypotheses. Shu Mou confirms that the endorser is Leehom Wang who was chosen because of his good looks, personality and reputation as a singer and actor. He is very popular with young Chinese people, for whom the product was initially targeted.
- Shu explains how young people have started to take an interest in astrological signs (participant two). Including the full range of astrological signs is a marketing ploy to encourage his fans to collect all twelve. These participants are effectively placed, carefully framing and complimenting participant one.
- The red contoured lines represent the third participant, which Beryl and Linda assume are stylised representations of mountains that serve to contrast with

the free flowing water (white). The importance of the mountains to this product's image show through in their relative size, repetition and the dominance of a powerful block of red, a colour which means luck and celebration in Chinese culture. In Western culture, the colour red is associated with love (Valentine's Day) and danger (stop signs). This contrasts to Indian culture, where red is the colour of purity and is often used in wedding outfits.

- The fourth participant is the fine black line squiggle which is co-located with the photograph of Leehom Wang. It's possibly Leehom Wang's signature, a semiotic that strengthens his personal endorsement of the product.

Action, or **processes**, are generally passive, however, the third label shows a close connection between Leehom Wang and a Wahaha water bottle. The environment of the visuals, or in grammatical terms, the **circumstances**, are notable for the absence of detail; purity, cleanliness and unclutteredness are accentuated through the use of crisp white shapes and spaces.

A range of *tenor* representations is achieved. The first and third labels have Leehom Wang engaging directly with the viewer, a design for strengthening the impact of appeal of the product through a demanding gesture which suggests social closeness. In contrast, in labels two and four, Leehom Wang's posture promotes an impersonal offer of engagement, where viewer distance is increased, allowing the viewer to gaze. Labels one, two and four, have the viewing from a lower angle, thus reinforcing the social power of Leehom Wang. Label three has a more equal viewpoint, thus hinting that Leehom Wang is also a 'realistic' endorser.

The formal composition of the visuals, or the *mode*, is achieved through lines of colour (red mountains) sharply contrasting against the white water (on the mountain) which also harmonises with the white background of the photo shots. Emphasis is achieved through repetition of image (mountains and water) and repetition across water bottles (a set of 12 to collect).

### Implications for Teaching & Learning

The research literature holds plenty of evidence pointing to the importance for our students of explicit instruction in reading visual images (see for example, Fox & Exley, 2009). Lyga (2004) introduces the idea that, because of the changing nature of our information delivery systems, students today have become visually dependent; she calls these young readers "Generation Visual" (cited in Thompson, 2008, p. 19). Exposure to a range of images, and providing our students with a language, including technical terminology, will greatly increase students' visual literacy, comprising an understanding of the social functions and cultural contexts of visual images. Teachers who integrate the study of visuals with reading and writing 'will not only develop students' ability to read visual texts but will also provide them with models for constructing their own [images]' (O'Sullivan, 1999, p.27).

However, their professional discussion turned to text analyst considerations. Adopting the nomenclature of Luke and Freebody, text analysts involve readers in the critical analysis of texts in order to understand how texts work, why they have been constructed, who benefits from their construction, and who controls access to them (Department of Education, Queensland, 2002).

- What kind of person, with what interests & values produced this text?

- What are the origins of this text?
- What is the text trying to make me believe & do?
- What beliefs & positions are dominant in the text?
- What beliefs & positions are silenced or absent?
- What do I think about the way this text presents these ideas & what alternatives are there?
- Having critically examined this text, what action am I going to take?

### Postscript

Arthurson and Cozmescu, in *Practically Primary* Vol. 12, No. 3, October 07, provide a 'Framework for Visual Literacy in the Primary Classroom' that is well worth considering. This framework includes a discussion on the role of the educator in teaching visual literacy.

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#### Author Biography

**Dr Beryl Exley** is a Senior Lecturer and Researcher in Language and Literacy Education at the Queensland University of Technology. She is the ALEA Queensland State Director (2006-2011) and is ALEA's representative on the International Oceania Development Committee (IDOC).

**Linda Tate** is an experienced teacher with a research masters from Griffith University. She is currently working as a literacy consultant with Pat Edgar Consultancy and undertakes part-time research assistant work within the Centre for Learning Innovation at the Queensland University of Technology.